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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model for a message-centered theory of human conflict based on the assumption that conflict will result from the pairing of any two functional messages that share a common antecedent but contain different consequences with oppositely signed affect. The paper first shows how to represent conflict situations diagrammatically according to the model. It then explains how conflict may be defused by the construction of a third message that effects a change in the original pair, and it describes an eight-step process through which solutions to conflicts may be achieved. A flowchart of the conflict resolution process is included. The final section of the paper shows how the conflict model was applied to a dispute between airmen and senior officers at an Air Force base, and tells how the eight-step process was applied to arrive at an acceptable resolution to the dispute. (GW)

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A CASE STUDY IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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A CASE STUDY IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

As the Seventies come to a close, it is becoming quite clear that American postsecondary education is undergoing a philosophical metamorphosis. Increasingly, the ability of higher education to respond to societal priorities is being closely scrutinized. In an effort to meet this challenge, many universities have begun to reconsider their curricula, especially insofar as the "real world" applicability of these courses is concerned. This wave of academic self-examination has affected the communication discipline as well; new courses such as "conflict resolution" have begun to appear at many institutions, and revamped versions of more traditional offerings, including "argumentation" and "debate", have also emerged. Against this background of academic concern for practical application, today's panel was scheduled.

This paper has two purposes: (1) to explicate a new theory of human conflict resolution, and (2) to report the results of an application of this model to an actual case. It is hoped that the material presented herein will provide a fruitful extension of the principles of communication and argumentation toward the resolution of practical, "real world" conflicts.

A Message-Centered Theory of Human Conflict Resolution*

We propose a message-centered theory of human conflict resolution. We begin by assuming that conflict requires the interaction of at least two elements or messages. However, not all pairs of inconsistent messages are appropriately labeled "conflictful." For example, if one person believes

that Babe Ruth hit 59 home runs in 1927, and the other individual is sure that the Bambino swatted 61, there exists a disagreement, but not a conflict. Similarly, if one fan thought Willie Mays to be the greatest athlete of all time, and another believed that Ty Cobb was in fact the very best, this too would be a disagreement, but not a conflict. If, however, one wants to attend an exciting baseball game, but knows that his or her spouse will be angry if he or she does, then we have conflict. Conflict occurs when conflicting messages contain both an antecedent (P) and a consequent (Q). Messages which may be reduced to the form, "If P then Q" may be termed "functional" messages. A message-centered theory of human conflict resolution would then begin with this definition: Conflict will result from the pairing of any two functional messages which share a common antecedent (usually a proposal) but contain different consequences with oppositely signed affect. The baseball game might be represented in this manner:

If Baseball Game $(\text{Antecedent})_1$	Then	Great Fun (+) $(\text{Consequent})_1$
If Baseball Game $(\text{Antecedent})_1$	Then	Angry Spouse (-) $(\text{Consequent})_2$

The third component of the functional statement, which must be present for conflict to exist, is of course belief. If the probability of the baseball game being fun is not very high, then the individual would probably experience little if any conflict. This belief basis has previously been termed the "subjectively expected utility" of an outcome. Such belief is

often formed out of direct experience with the antecedent and consequents. Belief is also formed through communication and the presence of discriminative stimuli which accompany the presentation of a functional message. Source credibility, supporting evidence, and statistical data are examples of discriminative stimuli which message receivers use to determine the veracity of a functional message.

The three functional message components have identifiable properties as diagrammed below:

If Antecedent $^{!+*?}$ Then Consequent $^{!+*?}$

Belief $^{?}$

Where: ! = voluntary commitment
+ = affect
* = specificity/comprehensibility
? = uncertainty

The first property of a message is the voluntary commitment that a message sender or receiver has toward the antecedent. Typically, this relates to a proposed course of action, such as attending a baseball game. The previously mentioned affect property pertains to both the antecedent and the consequent. Message senders and receivers attach affect to both the antecedent and the consequent. The third property is specificity, and may affect both the antecedent and the consequent. Specificity is defined as the extent to which a message sender or receiver can correctly identify a member of the class of things denoted or connoted by the antecedent or consequent. A final property, common to all three components, is uncertainty. Belief uncertainty refers to the question of whether or not a given antecedent does in fact lead to a given consequent.

Antecedent uncertainty refers to the question, "Which antecedent leads to a given consequent?" Consequent uncertainty refers to the question concerning which consequences emanate from a given antecedent.

With the inclusion of these properties, the initial conflict model may be expanded to accomodate two-person conflict situations:

Party A: If Antecedent$_1$ $^{!+*?}$ Then Consequent$_1$ $^{+*?}$

Belief$^{?}$

Party B: If Antecedent$_1$ $^{!+*?}$ Then Consequent$_2$ $^{-*?}$

Belief$^{?}$

For example, the individual in the previous situation might wish to avoid conflict by including his or her spouse in his or her plans. However, if the spouse has had negative experiences with baseball games, or believes that he or she would not enjoy this baseball game, whatever plans the couple shared would involve something other than the old ball game. The full conflict model may also be used to depict intergroup conflict. Suppose that one civic group favored the construction of a new baseball stadium, built in an easily accessible location. A conflict would probably arise between this group and the local homeowners who were striving to maintain possession of their easily accessible property.

Modes of Resolution. Since conflict may arise only when two appropriate (shared antecedent, different and oppositely signed consequents) functional messages are paired, the primary mechanism for defusing conflict is the construction of a third message. This additional message will accomplish

resolution by effecting a change in the original pair. Specifically, the conflict may be resolved by (1) changing message affect, (2) choosing between consequences, (3) denying message veracity, (4) identifying a special case, (5) adding to the antecedent, or (6) substituting for the antecedent. The first three methods are generally unilateral solutions, while the last three types are typically bilateral resolutions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Unilateral and Bilateral Conflict Resolutions

1. Changing Message Affect:	If Antecedent$_1$ Then Consequent$_1^+$
	If Antecedent$_1$ Then Consequent$_1^+$
2. Choosing Between Consequences:	Consequent$_1^!$: Consequent$_2$
3. Denying Message Veracity:	If Antecedent$_1$ Then Consequent$_1^+$
	(Not) If Antecedent$_1$ Then Consequent$_2^-$
4. Identification of Special Case:	If Antecedent$_1$ Then Consequent$_1^+$
	If Antecedent$_2$ Then Consequent$_2^-$
5. Adding to Antecedent:	If Antecedent$_1$ + Antecedent$_2$ Then Consequent$_1^+$
	If Antecedent$_1$ + Antecedent$_2$ Then (Not) Consequent$_2^-$
6. Substitution for Antecedent:	If Antecedent$_3$ Then Consequent$_1^+$
	If Antecedent$_3$ Then (Not) Consequent$_2^-$

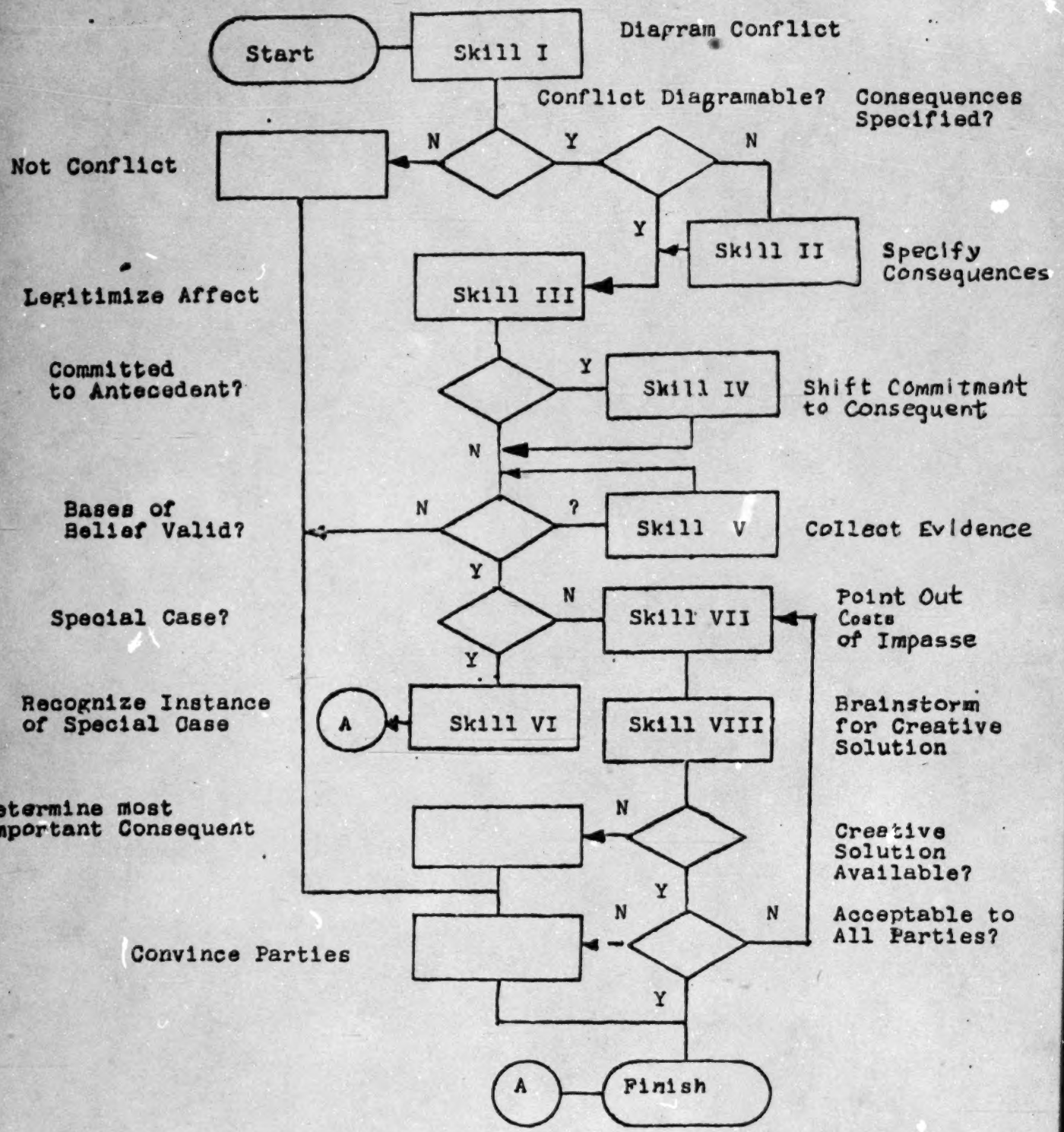
Behavioral Specificity. In order to effectively construct this third message which will trigger the resolution mechanisms outlined above, specific

behaviors must be learned and utilized. They are: (1) the ability to clarify (diagram) the conflict, (2) the ability to specify consequences, (3) the ability to legitimize the other party's consequences, (4) the ability to ascertain the veracity of a message, (5) the ability to shift commitment from an antecedent to a consequent, (6) the ability to recognize special cases of a message, (7) the ability to identify the costs of an impasse, and (8) the ability to discover a creative solution to the conflict. Figure 1 presents these skills in flowchart form.

The first skill is diagramming the conflict. All true conflicts may be represented in this manner. When a conflict cannot be diagrammed according to the model, then the situation is probably not a true conflict, but a case of disagreement, dislike, or aggression. When disagreement exists the parties to the problem should seek to acquire additional information or evidence which will indicate the truth or falsity of their respective beliefs. When a felt problem is a result of dislike rather than true conflict, the resolution of the problem rests with the improvement of the relationship between the two parties. When the problem results from the aggressive act of one or both parties, the resolution of the problem rests with the ability of someone, either a party to the problem or an external agent, to modify the aggressive responses of one or both parties. While conflict may be considered conceptually separate from disagreement, dislike, and aggression, the three concepts may of course be present and contributing to the perception of conflict.

The second important skill involved in the resolution of conflict is the specification of consequences. Recall that one property of consequences is "specificity." The consequences which ultimately define the state of conflict may do so without being concrete and well-defined to the parties to the conflict. Insofar as the parties to the conflict are not sure of the consequences, then conflict resolution cannot progress. Consequences should not be allowed to remain abstract; they must be made specific. A word or phrase may be said to be specific when a person who uses that word/phrase is able to identify all

Figure 1. Flowchart of Conflict Resolution Procedure



members of the class of things denoted by that word or phrase.

The third skill needed to successfully resolve conflict is that of legitimizing the affect which the other party attaches to his of her consequences. This skill may be labeled empathy, acceptance, or unconditional positive regard. Interpersonal conflicts are more easily resolved than interpersonal conflicts, not because the choices associated with interpersonal conflicts are more difficult, but because we often fail to accept the legitimacy of the affect which another ascribes to his consequences, whereas we usually accept the legetimacy of the affect which we ascribe to our own consequences.

The fourth skill concerns the ability of the parties to the conflict to determine and accept judgment concerning the veracity of messages. If the antecedent does not lead to either the positive or negative consequent, and if the parties can come to realize this, then conflict does not actually exist. Along with knowing how to apply this critical skill, conflict resolution demands that the parties to a conflict know when to apply it. The temptation is often present to attempt to resolve conflict by denying the other party's message, whether or not one has reasonable proof that it is invalid. A related, and perhaps the most difficult skill of all, is the ability to accept the fact that one's own message may prove invalid.

The fifth skill required for successful conflict resolution is the ability to shift commitment from the antecedent to the consequent. Earlier, dissonance was defined as a special case of conflict in which there is commitment to the antecedent of a functional message. When dissonance is present, many of the modes of conflict resolution are no longer viable. When dissonance is aroused, people are not receptive to the suggestion that their

message may not be valid. It is also difficult for people to accept many of the creative solutions to the conflict, such as adding to, amending, or substituting for the original antecedent. Partial and indirect support for this contention comes from the work of Sereno and Mortensen. Sereno and Mortenson demonstrated that when ego involvement is high, the reaching of public agreement is much more difficult. The skill of shifting commitment from the antecedent to the consequent involves demonstrating to (either yourself or) the other party that it is not the antecedent (proposal) but the consequent (s) which is important. If commitment can be shifted to the consequents, the conflict resolution process may continue.

One mode of conflict resolution which is prevented by the arousal of dissonance is the recognition that the particular conflict under consideration is a "special case" of what is otherwise a valid message. This introduces the sixth skill that makes up the conflict resolutions process: The ability to recognize the existence of a "special case." The special case occurs when an otherwise valid message does not obtain because of a unique set of circumstances. Special cases typically occur in the individual-institution conflict context. Suppose you were attending a convention luncheon, and that admission to the convention included the purchase of a luncheon ticket Should you lose your ticket, and are refused your meal, you might appeal to the host by displaying your convention admission receipt or identification badge. The ability to recognize the instance of a special case on the part of the host would resolve the conflict. However, responses such as "I'm only doing what I was told" often prevents this type of solution. The message which the host accepts is: "If no ticket, then the person may be stealing the lunch." This is an otherwise valid message. But in your case the

special case dictates that the message is not valid. Becoming sensitive to the frequent occurrence of "special cases" would benefit most of us as we attempt to deal with day-to-day conflicts.

A seventh skill suggested by the conflict model is the ability of identify the consequences of an impasse. Of the eight skills, this is the skill we come by most naturally. However, it is not a skill that is universally applied. Parties to a conflict often become so preoccupied with their own message and/or with denying the other's message that they lose sight of the adverse consequences of not resolving the conflict. One of the primary responsibilities of a mediator is to remind the parties to the conflict of the deleterious effects resulting from the continuation of the conflict.

The eighth and probably the most important skill is the ability to discover creative solutions to the conflict. The creative solutions maintain the positive consequences but do not accrue negative consequences. There are three variations of the creative solution: adding to, amending, and substituting for the original antecedent.

Although the eight crucial skills have been described, the flowchart is not yet complete. When all of the above modes of conflict resolution have been tried with no success, the remaining alternative is to choose between the two messages. This does not resolve the conflict; it only adds to the residual felt conflict that exists between the two parties. However there are times when the only option is to choose between the two messages. When the zero-sum assumption is valid (i.e. what is good for you is bad for me, and vice versa), the only alternative is to accept one or other of the two messages. The decision of which message to accept should be based upon the consideration of which

consequent is considered most important. The perception of residual conflict can be eased somewhat if the parties to the conflict can agree that one consequent is more important than the other.

It is important to note that the forced choice between consequents (and messages) occurs at the end rather than at the beginning of the flowchart. There exists a temptation to make this kind of binary choice at the outset of the conflict process. It would invariably take less time and thought to simply accept one's own message and reject the other party's message. However, this is rarely acceptable to both parties. Even where one of the parties has higher status and authority than the other, this decision may lead to severe problems. Even when only one party is involved (intrapersonal conflict), decision-making suffers when conflicts are not adequately explored in the manner outlined in the flowchart. Ultimately, even a decision beased upon forced choice is enhanced by a diligent attempt to defuse the conflict as discussed above.

The Case: The Air Force Human Relations Council

At a California Air Force Base, a problem arose over the following issue: Should dormitory visitations by females be allowed? The airmen and many of the noncommissioned officers favored the adoption of the policy, while the Base Commander and most of the senior officers were opposed to the change. The official response to the proposal, when originally sent to the Base Commander, was simply "No!" This was received poorly by many of the junior personnel, and they requested that someone from the civilian community be invited to alleviate the problem. A meeting of the Base Human

Relations Council was called, and a communication specialist was asked to help resolve the conflict.

At the beginning of the meeting, the participants agreed to use the model to resolve the dispute. The following steps were then taken by the member of the Human Relations Council.

1. Clarification of the conflict. As originally phrased by the two groups, the issue was diagrammed in the following manner:

$Airmen_1$ If Dormitory $Visitations_1$ Then $Really\ Good_1^+$

$Officers_2$ If Dormitory $Visitations_1$ Then $Problems\ for\ Base_2^-$

Since the above diagram includes two functional statements which share a common antecedent but have different consequences with oppositely signed affect, this dispute qualified as a bonafide conflict.

2. The next step was to ascertain whether the consequences had been adequately specified. The phrases "really good" and "problems for base" were shown to be unspecific, and the members of both groups proceeded to focus their efforts on rectifying this problem. Following the application of Skill # 2, the conflict was further refined:

$Airmen_1$ If Dormitory $Visitations_1$ Then $Trust\ for\ Junior\ Personnel_1^+$
Increased Responsibility
"Team" Atmosphere
Airmen Needs Responded to

$Officers_2$ If Dormitory $Visitations_1$ Then $Additional\ Costs_2^-$
Bad Press for Base
Violation of AF Regulations

Although some of the consequences could have been better specified, the result of the application of Skill # 2 was quite beneficial. The two groups could now move ahead to Skill # 3--Affect Legitimization.

3. Due to the severity of the initial rejection of the proposal (as well as a history of defensiveness on the part of both groups), this skill required some work. The senior officers seemed to understand quite well the feelings of the airmen. However, the sentiment was not reciprocated. One airmen remarked that the Base Commander was insensitive to the needs of the average air force member. Others complained about the fact that the initial rejection of the proposed change was "too cut and dried."

In an effort to surmount this emotional obstacle, members of the council participated in a brief role-playing exercise. An airmen was asked to assume the position of "Base Commander." The specific negative consequences of Skill # 2 became his consequences, and a discussion of the validity of each consequence was begun. During this simulation, Skills 4 and 5 (Shifting Commitment to the Consequent; Evidence Collection) were applied. Participants agreed to adjudicate the issue functionally--in terms of consequences, and on the basis of the veracity of the consequences. Following the simulation, all of the airmen conceded that the senior staff had valid reasons for opposing the policy change. The primary reason given by the junior personnel for their new outlook was the explanation of the negative consequences by the other group.

4. Skill # 4, shifting commitment to the consequent, was accomplished at the outset of the role play.

5. Skill # 5, evidence collection, was invoked during the simulation itself. Members of the council who had investigated various aspects of the problem came forward, and the veracity of each consequence was ascertained. In this case, all of the consequences, both positive and negative, were accepted by both of the groups as valid.

6. The conflict did not involve a special case (at least, none were identified).

7. The costs of not resolving the conflict were then discussed. The costs included: (1) continued lack of confidence in the Base Commander on the part of the junior personnel, and (2) continuance of the defensive atmosphere which had pervaded the Human Relations Council meetings in previous months.

8. The council members then tried to generate a creative solution to the conflict. The parties were unable to either add to or substitute for the original proposal. However, the process of actively attempting to find this type of answer was beneficial for the socio-emotional atmosphere of the situation.

9. Finally, the parties agreed to solution # 2: The most important set of consequences was determined. Because of the extra costs (which the Base could not afford), the probability of a bad press, and the fact that the proposed policy directly violated Air Force Regulations, the dorm visitation policy was not changed. The airmen indicated that they understood the rationale behind the decision, and were prepared to accept the solution.

Conclusion

Although a bilateral solution was not achieved, an acceptable resolution was accomplished. The process of using the message-centered model yielded some productive spinoffs. Interviews conducted after the meeting indicated that some of the airmen's positive consequences were actually achieved. Despite the fact that the policy change was not instituted, the way in which the conflict was handled communicated several things to the junior personnel. First, the denial of the change was not based upon any malice toward the airmen. The reasons given were specific and logical. As such, the feeling os mistrust (of airmen by officers) was assuaged to a great degree. Second, the information concerning the probable bad press and the high cost of implementing the change served to unite the entire group. The officers had said that the Commander had already gone over budget in other areas in an effort to provide increased services for Air Force personnel, and this information was new to many of the junior personnel. Finally, the aforementioned new information indicated to the airmen something else which was important: In many other situations, the Base Commander had been responsive to the needs of the Base personnel. These unforeseen benefits were realized as an indirect result of the application of the message-centered model.

Whether the positive result of this case was due primarily to the new model or to some other aspects of the intervention is secondary. The primary point of this paper is clear: Techniques developed by communication scholars are capable of effecting positive solutions to many "real world" problems.

*Much of the material presented in this section is borrowed from Smith, V.R., and Chase, L.J. "A Message-Centered Model of Human Conflict Resolution." Paper presented at the annual convention of the Western Speech Communication Association, November 1977, Phoenix, Arizona. Requests for reprints of this paper should be sent to Dr. Vai R. Smith, Department of Communication Studies, California State University, Sacramento California 95819.